



Latinos: Interrupting The Narrative In Film

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Latinos in the film industry are not just now joining the party. They have been busy putting in the work all these years earning their seat at the table. Now, they are ready to shatter glass ceilings - even in Georgia.

“We have been part of the conversation for a long time. But now... we are interrupting,” says actor Denise Santos, who in the last few years, together with her accomplices, has mobilized to create a home for an underrepresented segment in the industry in Georgia – Latinos.

As the industry bloomed with the 2008 tax incentive in Georgia for productions and post-productions brought to the state, certain opportunities opened up for Latinos, and some wheels started promisingly turning, “but we are not there yet,” says Santos, echoing Latino actors and actresses in Atlanta.



Co-Founders & Co-Producers of LIMA, Gabriella Ortiz, Viviana Chavez and Denise Santos (Photo by Ben Rollins)

In 2020, Sofia Vergara ranked as the highest-paid actress in the world, earning \$43 million from her role in Emmy-winning "Modern Family," NBC's "America's Got Talent," endorsements, and licensing deals. The worldwide success of the Colombian actress, known for her very heavy Spanish accent when speaking English, sent a message of hope and pride to other Latinas in the industry.

In the same year, *Hamilton's* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda made his appearance on the list of highest-paid male actors. Proudly representing Latinos as a Puerto Rican, Miranda ranked 7th on the list, earning \$47.7 million - still more than Vergara despite her higher rank on the women's list.

As promising as it is to see certain Hispanic actors gain national attention, Latinos in the industry are still being marginalized. Hispanics are the fastest-growing segment of the population of the United States and continue to have the largest per-capita movie theatre attendance among all demographics in the country - making up 25% of all movie tickets sold. However, Latinos and Hispanics are still heavily underrepresented on screen and in the industry as a whole.

Research done in 2021 by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative studying 1,300 top-grossing films revealed that in the past 13 years, 43.4% of the most popular films did not feature a Hispanic/Latino character, and only 3.5% of the films had a lead or co-lead Hispanic/Latino character.

The struggle is nationwide, but Latin creatives in Georgia are not willing to just sit around and wait for the change to come. It's time to interrupt.

Building Community in Atlanta

After years of running into each other at auditions, events, and productions, actresses Santos, Viviana Chavez, and Gabriella Ortiz decided it was about time they started talking to each other.

What started as a Facebook group of women who would gather to network over lunch, turned into Latinas in Media Atlanta (LIMA), an organization focused on advocating for more Latinos in the entertainment industry and creating a place of belonging for minority actors.



Co-Founders & Co-Producers of LIMA, Denise Santos, Gabriella Ortiz, and Viviana Chavez. (Photo courtesy of LIMA)

Denise Santos

Co-founder and co-producer of LIMA, Denise Santos is an Ecuadorian raised in Miami, Florida whose charm is perceived at the first interaction. Sitting in what looks like an audition set up, in front of a soft grey backdrop, with perfect lighting, Santos shares her story.

“I have always loved benign on stage,” says Santos. During her high school years, she fell in love with acting, but despite her mother’s support of it as an extracurricular activity, it was not acceptable as a career choice. Instead, she pursued a career in Child Psychology.

It was years later when Santos started participating in plays that she realized that acting was her real passion. “I knew I wanted to keep doing it!”, says Santos with a spark in her eyes. When Santos moved to Georgia in 2009, her husband and daughter strongly supported her return to the stage. “I started auditioning and taking classes, and realized that I could do it,” she says. Bouncing from live theatre to the front of cameras for film and television, and to sound rooms for voiceovers, the market and the industry were looking promising. However, something was missing. Santos craved a community of Latinas who were on a similar journey. “There were so many actors I would run into in the audition rooms and admired from afar, but we never really connected,” says Santos.

Inspired by powerful Latinas in Hollywood - such as America Ferrera, Eva Longoria, and Roselyn Sanchez who are using their platforms to uplift each other, tear down walls, and make a name for Latinos in the business - Santos started a group for women to network over lunch in Atlanta, "Latinas Who Lunch". A year later, with the help of two other tenacious women, that same Facebook Group would become a community for talented Latinas in Atlanta.

Gabriella Ortiz

Daughter of a professional dancer, Puerto Rican actress Gabriella Ortiz got involved in the arts at a very young age through dance, music, and theatre. "I always knew I wanted to be an actress," says Ortiz who despite having her mom involved in performing arts, she found herself struggling to get full support for an acting career. "My family didn't know anything about the industry. They told me I was going to have to figure it out on my own," she remembers.

After pursuing a career in Fashion Design in Italy, it wasn't long before Ortiz found her way back into acting. While completing an internship in Florida in 2009, Ortiz built on her acting education. Concurrently, it was nearly impossible to ignore the buzz about the big boom in the film industry in Georgia. "Everyone kept talking about how something big was coming, and how Atlanta was becoming the place to be for actors," says Ortiz. So, in 2016, after completing her studies, it only made sense for a decisive yearning actress to pack up her U-Haul and head over to the promised land. Not even fear could stop her.

Georgia brought professional opportunities for Ortiz, but it also brought challenges finding a community to feel a sense of belonging as a Latina. "It took a lot of research to find my community where I could bond with people over my culture," she says with a tight fist to her heart. "I felt alone."

The desire to build the community she craved and couldn't find led Ortiz to reach out to a fellow actress who she had been admiring from afar, Viviana Chavez. "We both auditioned for a role in "Dynasty" and when I found out another Latina had booked it, I knew I had to meet her," recalls Ortiz with excitement. "I felt a little bit like a stalker, but I wanted to connect because I felt alone as a Latina."

Stepping out of her comfort zone, once again, led the way for something bigger for Ortiz and the industry.

Viviana Chavez

From Uruguayan and Mexican parents, Viviana Chavez is an Atlanta native with the most welcoming smile. But don't let it trick you. She has portrayed some very angry and serious women on screen.

Like Santos and Ortiz, Chavez discovered her love for acting in high school. "I wasn't even supposed to get a role in that first play," Chavez remembers with a laugh. "The moment I stepped foot on stage on opening night, a switch flipped, and I became obsessed with theatre," says Chavez closing her eyes and reliving the moment. However, Chavez dismissed acting as a career option. "My parents' dreams as immigrants were about education and they would have wanted me to have a more practical career with job security," says Chavez, who earned a full ride to the University of Georgia. Searching for a practical career, she once again found herself on a stage. Only this time, she decided to follow her heart and stick with it. "My family had no clue about this world," says Chavez referring to performing arts. "At the time, my father passed away and my mother just trusted that I knew what I was doing."

In 2010, Chavez got signed by a prominent talent agency in Atlanta after just cold-submitting. Even though she attributes it to being a scarce face of diversity back then, it has been proven that it was more than that. Chavez has been booking jobs consistently for the past 11 years, including roles on projects that began to materialize the potential of Georgia in the industry, such as "The Walking Dead," "Dynasty," "Homeland," and "The Resident."

At the beginning of her career, Chavez's ultimate goal was to become an Oscar-winning actor, but through the mentorship of Professor and actor George Contini, she realized that her desire for it had nothing to do with the actual award. "It had everything to do with being represented. It had everything to do with being seen as a Latina who succeeded at it," says Chavez.

In the Academy's 93-year history, only four Latinos have won an Oscar in acting categories - only one Latina (Rita Moreno, 1961's "West Side Story"). "I wanted to get the job done," says Chavez passionately. Discovering her real desire, Chavez's meaning for success shifted. Her

goal became fulfilling a position of power to influence the stories that are being told, “and to give people opportunities which they normally wouldn’t get.”

Connecting with Santos and Ortiz, Chavez found herself heard and seen in ways that she didn’t know she was seeking as a minority actress. With that passion ignited within them, 2018 became a pivot point for each. Latinas in Media was born.

Latinas In Media Atlanta



A diverse group of actors, producers and storytellers celebrate the success of LIMA's 2019 Showcase. (Photo courtesy of LIMA)

In the Summer of 2018, Santos, Ortiz, and Chavez had their first official meeting as LIMA. “We had a vision. An idea. A possibility. We almost doubted our idea. But thankfully we had each other.” said Ortiz’s social media post with a photo of the three Latinas proudly wearing black t-shirts with white cursive letters that read, “Latinas Who Lead in Media.”

What makes LIMA special, is not just the similarities in each other’s upbringing and culture, but the beauty of their differences and the diversity of personal experiences that bring value to one another.

Partnered with A.I.R Entertainment and many other creatives in Georgia, LIMA hosted its very first showcase during Hispanic Heritage Month at The Robert Mellow Studios. For the next two

years, LIMA provided a platform for actors and creators to showcase their talents, tell their stories, and celebrate each other.

Through the uncertainties of 2020, LIMA didn't stop. The showcase went virtual offering original works, short films, readings, workshops, and a Latino pro-industry panel. Despite not being able to gather in person, Latinas in the industry showed up for each other. "It's home," says Chavez. "It's a home I didn't know I needed."

2021 has been a year of recalibration for LIMA, taking the time to recharge and strategize on what is next for the organization, and how it can continue to serve such an important underrepresented segment of the industry in Georgia.

Despite LIMA being focused on Latinas, the support of various males, Latinos and not Latinos, contributes to the efforts that made it possible. Such is the case of Robert Mellow himself, who, aside from being an inspiration for the founders, happily opens the doors of his studio to give LIMA a platform.

In four-short years, LIMA has become home for many. "I seek out folks who are like me, and have an upbringing like me," says ABC's "The Blacklist" Diany Rodriguez who attended each showcase in support of her local community of actors. "When LIMA came to town, we became much more mobilized."

As the industry continues to grow in Georgia, Latino actors and creators must overcome key obstacles around negative stereotypes, reputation as local talent, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and even struggles amongst its community. This is where Latinos are interrupting the conversation, demanding their voice is heard.

Breaking Stereotypes

Ending negative stereotypes is a pressing matter in the industry, not just for actors and creators, but for communities. "Representation on screen matters for our community – it shapes not just how others see us, but also how we see ourselves," said Eva Longoria, President, and CEO of UnbeliEVable Entertainment who partnered with USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism for the intensive study of representation on screen. 28% of top-billed Latino

characters were portrayed as criminals for the past 13 years in top-gross films - 40% of which were tied to a violent crime, according to USC Annenberg's data. The same research shows that 29% of the Latinas portrayed in the 1,300 top-billed films were sexualized - while none of the Latino male characters were.

Poverty is another cliché for Latin and Hispanic characters in film. A total of 13.2% of top-billed Latino characters in the past 13 years were portrayed as poor or with a low income. A significantly large percentage were given the perception of being outsiders, by portraying them as immigrants or living outside the United States. Only 33% of the Hispanic or Latino characters were U.S. born.

"I am so many things other than just a Latina," says Rodriguez. "I want to have the same opportunities to audition for those roles which are filled by white actors by default." The battle to find equality and inclusion in casting is about accurately representing the Latin and Hispanic culture to the world. "When (Hollywood) systemically excludes Latinos or routinely stereotypes Latinos in its products, it contributes to the invisibility and misunderstanding of our community in American society," said Congressman Joaquin Castro, former Chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

The battle for equal opportunities in the industry, and accurate representation is still a long way from being resolved, and Latino storytellers have pen and paper in hand, ready to bring the change.

"We don't get to be just regular humans," says Rodriguez who has already set boundaries not being willing to audition for roles portraying Latinos negatively. "My agents know it. I won't do those roles."

Local Talent Credibility

If battling against roles that negatively stereotype Latinos wasn't enough, Latinos are also in the fight to claim credibility and reputation as local talent in the Southeast. Despite Georgia being a relatively new key market for the film industry, proper training and education opportunities for actors have been available and rapidly increasing, providing exceptional tools for local talent to be as competitive as that of Los Angeles and New York.

The sense of depreciation for local talent is a shared sentiment for some actors in the industry in Atlanta, particularly Latinos. “We are not less valuable just because we are from Georgia,” says Rodriguez emphasizing the value of an actor in a smaller market who has had the opportunity to work in various platforms, wearing many hats. “We are not just capable. We are better.” “In Atlanta, we are not actors who are just waiting for the one-liner to come,” says Ortiz. “No. We are ready to work. We are ready to go on set, and we are prepared.”

Representation From Top to Bottom

On-screen representation for Latinos is only one part of the challenge. Over a decade, the underrepresentation of Latinos in leadership roles in the industry has not seen much improvement. “We need more Latinos in suits,” says Ortiz referring to the imperative need for representation where decisions are being made. “We need diversity when it comes to casting directors, agents, and producers in Georgia,” says Santos. “That’s how we need to interrupt.”

The USC Annenberg report showed that only 4.4% of directors in the last 1,300 top-gross films were Hispanic or Latinos - that is 35 directors in the last 13 years. Of that small percentage, only 3% were Latinas. For every 200 white men directors, there has been only one Latina director in the last 13 years. When it comes to producers and casting directors, only 3% of each category were Hispanic or Latino, and predominantly male. Overall, Latinas represented less than 1% of all producers across the last 1,300 top-gross films over a decade. The study also proved that when a Hispanic or Latino director or casting director was present, Latin characters and Latin cast notably increased.

As some set their hopes on the change to start from the top, others encourage their community of minority actors to start from wherever they are. “We can do so much as actors,” says Rodriguez. “We can start by valuing ourselves, carefully choosing the roles we play, and negotiating what we are worth.”

Support for One Another

The battle for equality on and off-screen in the film and television industry has been fought by many, for a long time. In Georgia, with a rapid influx of talent, the same commitment invested in

building a community is the same commitment needed of others to show up and support one another. “That’s where we fail,” says Ortiz. “How do we expect our stories to be heard?”

Minority and underrepresented creators depend on the change that starts from within their community. It starts with accepting and showing up for each other first. “If we as Latinos want more, then we as Latinos need to be more,” says the creator of the locally-produced short film *Hispanic Actor*, Javier Vazquez, Jr. “Be more active. Be more generous. Be more supportive.” The ask from one actor to another is the commitment to advocate, amplify, and celebrate each other’s work. “The success of one, is the success of all,” says Santos.

Despite the ongoing challenges and obstacles, Latinos in the industry in Georgia have also seen promising advancements that fuel and regenerate hope and vision for the community.

Big Moves

With exposed brick walls, high rustic ceilings, and bright natural light peeking through the windows, the first Latina-owned studio and production company now sits in historic Rome, Georgia, just 90 minutes northwest of Atlanta. Founded by Tyler Perry Studios’ architect, Maria Guerra-Stoll, Playa Azul Media (PAM) Studios was built with the sole mission to offer development, finance, and studio support to underserved minority communities who seek an opportunity in the film and television industry. Inspired by what Tyler Perry did for his community, Guerra-Stoll decided it was time for her to create a legacy for her community. “There are a lot of Latinos who are invisible, and we want to see if we can tell our stories.”

Pioneers like Guerra-Stoll not only break glass ceilings, sending a loud and clear message that Latinos are present in the film industry in the Southeast, but also carry a lot of influence. “She is ready and willing to walk the walk,” says Latina actress and producer Michelle Rivera-Huckaby about Guerra -Stoll. “I love that we get to have someone like (her) in our community, doing the work to open doors for people, and allowing us to do it with her.”

After months of renovations, and with projects already in the books, PAM opened its doors officially in November of 2021 during the Rome International Film Festival. It is exciting to see what is to come.

This is the Beginning

“I am hopeful for the future of the industry in Georgia. I want it to stay here,” says Chavez who decided on staying in Georgia after all. “My life is here, and I want my job to stay here. I know there is opportunity.”

Looking around, one knows that there is no need to go to Hollywood to meet talented and experienced Latinos in film. Georgia has plenty of diverse actors, creators, and hungry storytellers wanting to be heard. They are no longer waiting for their turn. Latinos are interrupting.

“We just need to realize how great we are. We need to believe it ourselves,” says Rodriguez. “We are here. We are working, and we are thriving.”